

Using Erikson to Work More Effectively with Teenage Parents

Lorraine DeJong

Although in recent years the rate of teenage pregnancy in the United States has been declining, every day in America 1,354 children are born to teenage mothers (Children's Defense Fund 2001, back cover). This translates to almost a half-million births a year. These figures, along with the findings from brain development research, have compelled many communities to implement programs that support young parents and their children (DeJong & Cottrell 1999).

The trend to provide early care and education services to children born to teenage parents is expected to result in many positive outcomes. High-quality child care programs offer young children the opportunity to spend their early years in safe, nurturing environments filled with age-appropriate learning experiences that could benefit them for a lifetime. But are all early child-



hood programs and teachers ready to provide care for this special population of young children and their families?

As a former director of an early childhood program serving infant children of teenage parents, it has been my experience that teachers often do *not* feel adequately prepared to work with adolescent parents. Whereas most teachers have some background experience and training with infants or preschoolers, few have had preparation in working with teenagers.

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Teachers and teenage mothers

Teachers often report that teenage mothers create unique challenges. For example, teachers may feel frustrated when they see a young mother show a lack of responsibility for or apparent disinterest in the care of her child. Some become angry when a teen appears to compromise the needs of her infant to get on the good side of her boyfriend. Others get annoyed when a teenager repeatedly brings an unclean baby or dirty bottles to the center. Some teachers feel hurt or insulted when a teenager fails to follow through on their recommendations for a toddler's toilet learning. Some get upset when a teen is punitive toward her preschool child or hostile to a teacher during a parent conference.

The interpersonal conflicts that sometimes arise between teachers and teenage mothers over the teens' parenting practices or behavior toward staff can become overwhelming for teachers. Without support, good teachers may resign from their positions or teenagers may remove their children from even the best early childhood programs. Neither of these outcomes is likely to benefit anyone, especially the young children who

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so desperately need the safe, nurturing learning environments that good programs provide.

Throughout my years of work with teenage parents and their young children, I have found Erikson's model of social-emotional development (Erikson [1963] 1993, [1968] 1994) to be very useful on several levels. (See "Erikson and Teenage Parent Personality Development" for a brief analysis of some possibly unresolved issues in teenage parents' emotional development, based on Erikson's theory.) First, it helps teachers to better understand the emotional needs of the young children in their care and how best to meet those needs at a critical time in the children's lives.

Second and equally important, because the model describes how aspects of personality could develop, for better or worse, throughout the life span, it helps teachers to better understand the young parents in their programs. This is important knowledge for early childhood teachers as they work to help teenagers be good parents. As Belsky (1984) emphasizes, while good parenting is a function of a child's characteristics and the contextual sources of support the mother receives, the *psychological resources* of the parent exert the strongest causal influence on caregiving behavior.

Last, program practices and policies designed around Erikson's stages can assist teachers in being

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Erikson and Teenage Parent Personality Development

According to Erik Erikson (1902–1994), there are eight unique stages in human personality development, beginning at birth and extending throughout late adulthood. At each stage different social-emotional crises or conflicts emerge. These crises must be successfully negotiated for a healthy adult personality to unfold. How an individual eventually resolves each conflict greatly depends on the emotional quality of that individual's social environments.

The following analysis provides an application of Erikson's theory from birth through adolescence (stages 1 through 5). The analysis suggests how adverse developmental outcomes from childhood *could* manifest themselves in the behaviors of teenage mothers. The application has evolved over my many years of knowing, teaching, and working with teenage parents and observing over time a wide range of adolescent behaviors.

The analysis focuses primarily on the emotional development of teenage *mothers*, rather than fathers, because the mothers are the young parents whom teachers most frequently see in the early childhood setting. However, teachers who have opportunities to work with teenage fathers in their programs may find this analysis could also apply to them.

Stage 1: Trust versus mistrust (infancy)

Without responsive and sensitive parenting in the first year of life, a child may grow up to be a teenager who lacks faith in herself or others. A teenager lacking this basic sense of trust in the world might be skeptical of the intentions of others. She may reject the suggestions of teachers and other service providers who try to help her plan for the future or care for her child. Her own lack of trust may leave the teenager without an appreciation for the need to establish a basic sense of trust between herself and her child early in the child's development.

Stage 2: Autonomy versus shame and doubt (toddlerhood)

When a toddler's growing independence is inadequately supported, that toddler may grow into a teenager who lacks a basic sense of responsibility. As a young mother she may compensate for an underdeveloped sense of autonomy by failing to show appropriate responsibility for herself or her child. She may blame others for her difficulties. She may overly assert her authority in matters regarding the care of her child and be intolerant of outside influence. Her own need to control her life or situations in which she finds herself—especially as they pertain to her child—may be such that she lacks the necessary impulse control to provide good care and guidance to her child.

Stage 3: Initiative versus guilt (preschool years)

Without a world full of rich exploratory experiences and positive guidance beginning during the preschool years, an adolescent may fail to acquire a basic sense of curiosity, ambition, and empathy for others. As a young parent she may be unmotivated to stay in school or to take initiative in planning for her future. She may show disinterest in caring for her baby and even act in ways that suggest insensitivity to the needs of her child.

Stage 4: Industry versus inferiority (school-age years)

A child who experiences limited success with specific school-related tasks and frequent failure during the elementary years can grow into a teenager who feels incompetent and inferior. She may see herself as powerless to make a difference in the world, her options in life as limited, and her lifelong prospects as hopeless. This adolescent's overall sense of inferiority may prompt her to become a teenage mother out of her need to experience self-worth. As a young parent she may try to compensate for her lack of competence by having unrealistic expectations for her future. She may be overly critical and judgmental of others, especially those who are trying to provide support to her and her child.

Stage 5: Identity versus role confusion (adolescence)

Depending on the extent to which her family and school experiences during childhood supported the formation of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry, a teenager may demonstrate a range of be-

haviors that could jeopardize positive identity development.

Some girls enter adolescence asking questions related to identity very different from those of adolescent girls who had more positive childhood experiences (Musick 1993). For example, instead of seeking the answers to educational or vocational questions related to a future career, some teenage mothers address identity issues in ways that are grounded in earlier periods of development. According to Musick (1993), when the teenage mother asks the ultimate question of identity, "Who am I?" she may focus more on "Who cares about me?" "Whom can I trust?" "On whom can I depend?" or "Where can I feel secure, safe, and important?"

If an adolescent focuses her psychological energies too strongly on resolving unmet early childhood dependency needs instead of on the critical social and emotional tasks of adolescence, she may be ill prepared for her role in society as a competent adult. She may unconsciously believe that early parenthood is a way to gain love, acceptance, independence, prestige, and status, and as a result she may make parenting commitments before exploring other alternatives for her future.

We as teachers of a teenage mother's young child must recognize just how much a child can mean *emotionally* to her. Most important, we must appreciate how these intense feelings could influence the way she cares for her child and responds to the adults in her life who are trying to support her.

more responsive to the developmental needs of young mothers. By being more sensitive, responsive, and supportive to teenage parents whose children are in their care, early childhood teachers are more likely to improve parent-teacher relationships. With better relationships, teachers can more effectively assist young parents in becoming better caregivers and first teachers of their young children. Stronger relationships with young parents may also lead to greater job satisfaction for teachers.

Erikson and early childhood program policies and practices

The following sections present suggestions for program policies and practices consistent with Erikson's framework for healthy personality development during the childhood years. They are strategies to help early childhood professionals work more effectively with teenage mothers to foster positive adolescent emotional development so that these special parents can be more effective caregivers of their young children. (For ideas regarding young fathers, see "Strategies for Involving Teenage Fathers with their Children," p. 90.)

Suggestions for developing trust

Teenagers are more likely to keep their children enrolled in good early childhood programs when they trust the teachers and staff in the program. Although building trust with families is important in any program, it is crucial when working with teenage parents who may lack a basic sense of trust.

Teenagers should feel accepted, valued, and respected by all members of the child care team. When trust exists between teacher and teen, the teacher is in a position to influence the teen in matters of

Strategies for Involving Teenage Fathers with Their Children

1. Mediate through the mother to let fathers know they are welcome to visit with their children in the program at any time.
2. Work with high schools to encourage fathers to visit their children at lunch and other free periods during the day.
3. Include more male teachers and male volunteers in the child care program to make teen fathers feel more comfortable and to serve as effective role models.
4. Invite fathers to join mothers in attending parenting workshops at the center, presented at times convenient to them.
5. Work with high schools to provide workshops on how fathers (of any age) can foster their young children's development.
6. Plan programs of interest to both teenage parents—mothers and fathers.
7. Engage fathers in conversation about their children when fathers provide transportation for mothers and/or children to the program.
8. Invite fathers to all special events and activities in the center—including educational and career development workshops that might be available to mothers.
9. Plan center events that include fathers and other extended family members. Where appropriate, help extended family members to appreciate the role of the father in a child's life.
10. Provide specialized staff development to help teachers understand gender differences in communication styles, appreciate the importance of not blaming or judging a father's behavior, and communicate to fathers the importance of their role in their child's development.

parenting and help her recognize the importance of building trust with her young child. To this end, programs can do the following.

Provide consistent teachers to young children.

Because a teenage mother may have experienced traumatic separation from a primary caregiver in her own life, she may be fearful of trusting caregiving professionals. Ideally programs assign a teenager's young child to an experienced, dependable teacher who is available to communicate regularly with the mother.

Schedule teens as active participants in the center.

Teenagers are more likely to trust teachers if they see what goes on each day in the program and know that the children receive consistent, high-quality care. One way to get teens actively involved in the child care program is to require pregnant teens and young mothers to assist in the center for at least a few hours each week. While working alongside staff, they will have the opportunity to learn and practice nurturing caregiving.

Teenage parents, fathers as well as mothers, can also be encouraged to spend time with their child during their lunch hour and during special center activities and events.

Find ways to identify with a teenager. Teenagers are more likely to adopt the caregiving practices of early childhood teachers with whom they have characteristics and experiences in common. One way that

teachers can foster positive identification is by doing things with a teenager that the teen finds fun. This is so important because teenage mothers are young—they need fun in their lives—and this can help make a mom more nurturing.

Staff can further foster positive identification by planning shared activities with young parents and finding ways for teens to meet other teenage mothers who have “made it” as young adults. For example, a teacher might work alongside a teenager in the care of her child (perhaps bathing the child together) or share celebrations (such as holidays and birthdays) or personal stories and parenting experiences. Encourage teenage parents to give testimonials in parent meetings.

Address individual teenager needs and concerns. Teenagers need to feel respected as individuals. It is important for staff to have informal conversations daily with the young mother about how things are going in her life and about issues related to the care of her child. A teacher also might

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In our experience, when teenagers regularly receive the undivided attention of a caring adult each day and during a monthly conference, they feel special. These positive feelings can result in the child receiving more love and attention from the mother. During private conferences many teens open up about their personal challenges and circumstances, providing staff with better insight into their behaviors. The conferences offer a one-on-one opportunity for the teacher to provide a mother with specific caregiving recommendations for her child and to connect the teenager with appropriate community agencies or resources if needed.

Respect confidentiality and privacy. Few of us seek advice from those who betray our confidences. For teenagers, who are likely to be egocentric thinkers (Elkind 1994), this is especially true!

It is crucial for teachers to be up front with teenagers on matters of concern and not talk behind their back to other parents or staff. When a mother discloses a personal family matter, staff should respect

the mother's and her family's privacy.

When a teenager shares information that cannot be kept confidential (for example, when the teacher fears there is the potential for danger to the teen or the child), it is important that the teacher be honest with the teenager and convey that although she cannot maintain confidentiality, she will be there to offer her support.

Finally, centers show respect for privacy when they provide special accommodations for teens, like spaces for their personal belongings and areas or rooms for nursing their infants.



Suggestions for developing autonomy

Teenagers who feel autonomous are self-motivated. They consider themselves independent beings who have some control over their lives and their futures. Autonomous individuals take responsibility for themselves and those in their care. They understand that in all relation-

ships there must be negotiation and compromise. To help teenage parents develop a sense of autonomy, teachers might consider the following strategies.

Provide teenagers with power and choice. Teenagers typically can be argumentative with adults (Elkind 1994). They are more likely to be agreeable when they feel they have some control over their lives.

Teachers can provide opportunities for teen mothers to exercise legitimate power and influence by remembering that the moms are the experts about their babies and asking them to share their knowledge of the child's likes and dislikes, sleeping and eating habits, and such. Teachers can let teen mothers decide which activities they might like to do with their children when they are caring for them in the program.

Teachers can include young parents in discussion, debate, and problem solving concerning certain policy decisions, like whether children can wear jewelry or bring in personal toys from home.

Provide a classroom structure that fosters safe exploration. Teenagers are more likely to be self-motivated, and thus try out new learning activities with their children, when they feel safe taking risks.

Some teenage parents may have histories of family disorganization, exposure to violence, or abuse that leave them with deficits in self-reliance, sense of responsibility, or impulse control (Baumrind 1996). Classroom environments that maintain a reasonable level of order, cleanliness, organization, structure, and routine along with warmth, respect, and acceptance may provide teens with the sense of security they lack. When teens seem comfortable in the classroom environment, teachers can model

new learning activities with their young children and encourage the parents to try them out.

Help teenagers demonstrate and manage responsibility. The more a teenager is offered age-appropriate responsibilities, agrees to take them on, and then follows through, the more likely she is to develop independence and accept responsibility for herself and her young child.

One way programs can help teenage parents (including fathers) understand and manage their responsibilities is to provide ongoing parenting classes for them and their families. During class sessions, staff can remind teenagers of specific child care responsibilities that must be addressed (such as keeping their child's immunizations up to date) and connect them with school and community resources that may help them manage their lives (such as transportation).

When teachers consistently acknowledge teens for following through on their responsibilities (such as bringing clean diapers and bottles to the center every day), the parents are more likely to feel autonomous.

Suggestions for developing initiative

Adolescents with a healthy sense of initiative demonstrate curiosity and interest in the world around

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them. They are eager to learn and master skills they will one day need as competent adult members of society. They show a willingness to try different activities and undertake challenges. They demonstrate a sense of empathy for others. To help teenage mothers develop a sense of initiative, caregivers can try some of the following strategies.

Help teens make plans and set goals. Staff can use private monthly meetings as a time to discuss with a young mother the milestones of her child's growth and plan with her ways to foster her child's development at home and at school. Staff can also use conference time to help a teen review and determine short-term personal plans and goals. She might set academic goals or goals for the improvement of her life circumstances. When teenage mothers are active participants in the child care program, staff can also encourage them to assist in developing goals, lesson plans, and activities for the young children in the group.

Practice, model, and teach positive discipline. Many adolescent mothers come from backgrounds lacking warmth, freedom, and opportunities to make decisions and choices (Musick 1993). Teens who were reared with authoritarian dis-

cipline practices lacking these features are more likely to use the same parenting styles with their children. On the other hand, teens reared without structure and expectations are likely to be permissive with their own children. It is important that teachers consistently model ways to prevent problem behaviors in young children and use positive guidance strategies such as redirection, distraction, and problem solving.

Reviewing and discussing case studies about parent-child, mother-father, and parent-teacher conflicts is useful during individual conferences, parenting classes, and meetings and during other informal interactions with young parents. Case studies (Rand 2000) can help teens gain empathy because the cases help them think and reflect on their own feelings and those of others.

Program directors should never punish pregnant or parenting teens, instead providing opportunities for teens to make restitution to others when they have acted inappropriately (Kamii 1984). For example, requiring a teenage mother to replace diapers or formula she has "borrowed" from other young mothers in the program allows her to experience the consequences of her actions.

Suggestions for developing industriousness

Teens who have developed a basic sense of industry feel productive and capable of mastering valued school-related tasks. They feel good about themselves because they have received approval and recognition for their efforts. They realize they cannot always be good at everything and that is OK. To help teenage mothers foster a sense of industry, programs can do the following.

Provide opportunities for teens to demonstrate competence. The histories of many adolescent mothers include school failure. Therefore, it is important for programs to find ways to help teens demonstrate competence. Feelings of success

parenting competence with other students. These skills could include positive caregiving practices they learned through a parenting class or saw modeled in the child care center, such as reading with an infant or toddler. Pregnant students and young mothers can assume

leadership duties in the center, including teaching, creating classroom displays, coordinating and implementing program events and activities, leading parent meetings, and training new parent assistants.

Centers can obtain special awards, like baby toys or tickets to a movie theater, to periodically recognize a teenager's outstanding performance as an assistant in the infant/toddler program or perfect school attendance.

may help motivate a teenager to act responsibly in trying to reach personal and academic goals.

Ideally child care programs are available to teenage parents on site or near academic or vocational programs and have somewhat flexible attendance policies that offer adolescent mothers access to tutoring so they can remain in school.

When young parents take part in the early childhood program, staff can ask them to share their

Provide recognition to teenage parents for their accomplishments. Everyone appreciates a pat on the back, and the teen mother is no exception. In fact, her need for recognition may increase following the birth of her child because the attention at home has shifted away from her and her pregnancy to the baby.

Giving young mothers regular recognition can help them maintain a positive self-image and help minimize any possible feelings of jealousy toward the child. Centers can work with philanthropic groups and community businesses to obtain special awards—like baby toys or car seats or something more fun and teen directed, like coupons for tickets to a movie theater—to periodically recognize a teenager's outstanding performance as an assistant in the infant/toddler program or perfect school attendance. Newsletters and newspaper announcements can recognize and validate teens' accomplishments both in and outside the child care center.

Suggestions for developing a positive identity

Teenagers on the road to a healthy adult identity will actively explore options related to their careers, values, friends, religion, and lifestyle before making commitments to a way of life. Along the way, they will reflect upon their past, try out a variety of roles, and consider issues from different points of view.

Child care programs can use the strategies that follow to help teenage mothers in this important exploration process.

Provide opportunities for teenagers to be reflective. Teenage parents who reflect on their experiences are more likely to be sensitive, responsive caregivers to their young children (Brophy-Herb &

Honig 1999). Programs can encourage pregnant students and young mothers to be reflective by having them write in personal journals about their family, their past, the present, and their feelings about caring for their child. Teachers can help teenagers keep baby books that describe their child's early experiences and record their memories and feelings about those experiences.

Provide resources and supports that connect teenagers to the future. Young mothers must understand that both good parenting and paid work that provides financial support to the family are crucial for a stable future for them and their child. Child care programs must collaborate with families and schools to introduce teen mothers to a range of future education and employment options and to assist them with an active, personal understanding of the work ethic and career planning (Lindsay & Enright 1997).

Child care facilities located near vocational-technical programs can help teens manage their school-to-work and parenting roles more effectively. Flexible hours of operation (that is, the child care program opens early in the morning or stays open later in the evening) may be helpful to teens participating in work-based learning that includes workplace mentoring, job shadowing, or actual employment while still in school.

Finally, centers can plan parent meetings on topics that relate to career and work and maintain parent libraries and bulletin boards that contain parenting-, work-, and

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school-related resources for teens and their families.

Conclusion

Research suggests that adolescent mothers with strong, reliable, caring, and responsive support systems are more resilient and satisfied with their lives. They are better able to relate to and rear their children and get on track themselves to becoming productive citizens in their communities (Unger & Wandersman 1988).

To the extent that we in the early childhood community become *significant adults* in their lives, we have the potential to play an important role within the much needed support networks for teenage mothers and their young children (Galbo 1989; DeJong & Cottrell 1999). This is because we model, encourage, and reinforce so many of the coping efforts and positive behaviors that help a teenage mother foster the healthy development of her young child and assist her in the search for a healthy adult identity (Musick 1993).

We must remember that teachers are not trained therapists. We cannot address some teen mothers' deep emotional issues. However, as professional educators we can and must use what we know about healthy growth and development to better understand adolescent parents and support them in their

efforts to be good caregivers and first teachers of their young children. If we are successful, we may be able to make a real difference in the lives of many of these special parents and their children.

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For further reading

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